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The life and times of Gordon Rowley (1921–2019)

Colin C Walker

Gordon Douglas Rowley has had a massive influence in the world of succulents both here in the UK and worldwide – indeed he was an internationally known celebrity. Gordon led a full and varied life and we can only touch briefly here on a botanical career spanning an incredible 80 years. Photography as indicated.

Introduction

Gordon was born in London on 31 July 1921, at the age of nought as he would have put it, as the only son of Florence Gladys Goldsworthy and Cecil Rowley. He died in the Reading area on 12 August 2019 aged 98. A few local Branch members were present at his 98th birthday celebration which of course included cake consumption, one of Gordon's passions.

In brief summary Gordon could be described as a British botanist and horticulturalist. He studied for a BSc in Botany at King's College, University of London, from where he graduated in 1942.

His first significant employment was at the John Innes Institute, Merton from 1948 to 1961, principally as Curator of the Rose species collection, later broadened

to become Keeper of all collections, including economic trees and shrubs. When the John Innes Institute was relocated to Norwich, Gordon moved to Reading as a Lecturer in Horticultural Botany at the University of Reading where he remained from 1961 till his retirement in 1981 aged 60.

In 1966 he bought a house within easy walking distance of the University and he immediately named the house Cactusville, an address that became synonymous with him in the world of succulents. He set about creating a botanists' and hobbyists' paradise in which, at times, it was hard to move. Cactusville became the 'go to' destination for many visiting dignitaries in the world of succulents (Figs. 1 & 2). I myself first went there in 1971 and visited Gordon on numerous occasions thereafter signing the visitor's

book each and every time as required of all visitors. This custom was one which Gordon insisted on for entry to Cactusville.

Gordon always had wide interests which are referred to later. However, initially it was entomology that was his focus with succulents playing second fiddle. He joined what was then the Yorkshire Cactus Society, soon to become the National Cactus and Succulent Society, on 1 April 1946 with membership number 57, and was a member for 72 years. As we now know, succulents soon



Fig. 1 Gordon in the Cactusville garden, August 2007 (Photo: Len Newton)



Fig. 2 Gordon in the Cactusville greenhouse, August 2007 (Photo: Len Newton)

came to dominate his life and his early years in the world of succulents are recalled in 'Rowley reminiscing' (Rowley, 1988).

He travelled in search of succulents in the wild in the USA and Mexico three times in 1968, 1974 and 1983 and was in Africa in 1971, usually accompanied by his lifelong friend Len Newton (Newton, 2008).

In the world of succulents he had several roles. He was a founder member of the IOS, the International Organisation for Succulent Plant Research, and edited their invaluable *Repertorium Plantarum Succulentarum* 1952 to 1982, a compilation of new names of succulents.

His penchant for the other succulents was highlighted when he became President of the African Succulent Plant Society from 1966 to 1976.

With the amalgamation of the National Cactus and Succulent Society with the Cactus and Succulent Society of Great Britain in 1983 to form the British Cactus and Succulent Society (BCSS), Gordon was unanimously elected as the inaugural President of the BCSS, a post he held till he retired in 2004. During his term in office he also held the dual role as editor of *Bradleya* from 1993 to 2000. I feel honoured to have followed Gordon's footsteps in both these prestigious roles within our society. As *Bradleya* editor I was delighted to have Gordon there as a guiding hand and as ever he freely gave of his time to provide advice and

assistance. He willingly acted as a referee ensuring scientific accuracy for several of the papers published in our prestigious yearbook, providing constructive advice to authors, sometimes on contentious issues.

Publications

Gordon's incredible legacy derives notably from his vast output of publications and to describe him as a prolific author greatly understates his productivity. His first article, entitled 'Succulents and cacti', published in 1942, was a mimeographed production consisting of eight foolscap pages with a very small circulation. Notice here right from day one Gordon's desire to let cacti play second fiddle to the wider concept of succulents, such that over his long career he aimed to view cacti as merely a subset of the wider world of succulents.

His vast outpouring of material on succulents grew from then on. He must literally have published many hundreds of articles on our beloved plants in numerous newsletters, journals, periodicals and yearbooks around the world.



Fig. 3 Book cover. Strawberry Press, 1997 (Photo: Colin C Walker)

Table 1. Books and booklets published by Gordon D Rowley (1959–2017)

Title	Date	Publisher	Place of Publication	Notes on editions, etc
<i>Flowering Succulents</i>	1959	Living Colour Publications	Farnham, Surrey	
<i>The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Succulents. A Guide to the Natural History of Cacti and Cactus-like Plants</i>	1978	Salamander Books	London	Also issued in American, Dutch, French, German and Italian editions
<i>Name That Succulent</i>	1980	Stanley Thornes Ltd	Cheltenham	
<i>Rowley Rhyming (1931–1981). Joyful Jingles for the Under 0's</i>	1981	Privately published	Reading	Also issued as part of the Cactusville Facsimile series
<i>The Adenium and Pachypodium Handbook</i>	1983	British Cactus and Succulent Society	Oxford	
<i>The Haworthia Drawings of John Thomas Bates</i>	1985	Succulent Plant Trust	Buckhurst Hill	
<i>Field Numbers of Succulent Plants. A Collector's Logbook 1968–1983</i>	1986	Privately published	Reading	
<i>Caudiciform & Pachycaul Succulents</i>	1987	Strawberry Press	Mill Valley, California	
<i>A Hundred and One Things to do with Glacé Cherries</i>	1988	Privately published	Reading	Also issued as part of the Cactusville Facsimile series
<i>N.E. Brown Stapelieae Extracted from "The Gardeners' Chronicle" 1875–1935</i>	1989/1990	International Asclepiad Society/C.C. Walker	Aspley Guise, Beds.	Issued in two editions; 2nd edition 1990
<i>Didiereaceae. 'Cacti of the Old World'</i>	1992	British Cactus and Succulent Society	Richmond, Surrey	
<i>Charles Lemaire. Iconographie descriptive des Cactées (1841–1847)</i>	1993	Strawberry Press	Mill Valley, California	Facsimile edition of the British Museum copy with introduction by Gordon D Rowley
<i>Succulent Compositae. A Grower's Guide to the Succulent Species of Senecio & Othonna</i>	1994	Strawberry Press	Mill Valley, California	
<i>Anacampseros, Avonia, Grahamia. A Grower's Guide</i>	1995	British Cactus and Succulent Society	York	
<i>A History of Succulent Plants</i>	1997	Strawberry Press	Mill Valley, California	
<i>Pachypodium & Adenium. The Cactus File Handbook No. 5</i>	1999	Cirio Publishing Services Ltd	Southampton	Revised edition of the booklet published in 1983
<i>CITES Aloe and Pachypodium checklist</i>	2001	Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew/ Sukkulenten-Sammlung	Kew/Zurich	Co-authored with Urs Eggli and Len Newton
<i>Crassula. A Grower's Guide</i>	2003	Cactus & Co. libri	Venegono, Italy	Also issued in Italian and Russian editions
<i>Teratopia. The World of Cristate and Variegated Succulents</i>	2006	Cactus & Co. libri	Tradante, Italy	Also issued in an Italian edition
<i>Succulents in Cultivation – Breeding New Cultivars</i>	2017	British Cactus and Succulent Society	Hornchurch, Essex	



Fig. 4 Gordon with the Myron Kinnach Lifetime Achievement Award from the CSSA in August 2013, with the backdrop of the Cactusville Victorian bookcase (Photo: Marjorie Thorburn)

A particular favourite for myself and many other members was 'Rowley Reporting', a gossip column in the National Cactus and Succulent Journal that ran for 96 issues from 1958 to 1982. This was a varied mix which included hot topical news items, book reviews, reports on visits to habitats and collections, and of course many Rowley musings for which he became famous.

It is his books, though, for which he is renowned throughout the world of succulents and his total number of books and booklets on succulents is a remarkable 20 (Table 1). Further details are provided by Mottram (2008) in his 'Selected annotated bibliography of works by Gordon Rowley'.

Of his several groundbreaking original books my all time favourite is *A History of Succulent Plants* published by Strawberry Press in 1997 (Fig. 3). I had a small hand in the production of this book, reading all the chapters in the manuscript, commenting and adding some art work. This book records succulents through the ages from Egyptian times to the closing stages of the 20th century. It is very readable and

beautifully produced, as well as being a mine of information into which I often dip to check particular facts.

His most recent and final book is *Succulents in cultivation – breeding new cultivars* published in 2017 when Gordon was an amazing 95 years old! Few authors keep going and are prolific in their nineties. I was pleased to act as editor and I am delighted that the BCSS was the publisher. We are indebted to Alice Vanden Bon and Roy Mottram for their invaluable inputs here.

His books are his greatest legacy and have given him international recognition, particularly since several books were published overseas. Strawberry Press in California published four of his books and Cactus & Co. in Italy another two. A few of his books were published in several languages and I am the proud owner of *Crassula A grower's guide* published by Cactus & Co in Russian.

Gordon also contributed to several encyclopaedias, for example *The Illustrated Handbook of Succulent Plants* (2001–2004) and the *New RHS Dictionary of Gardening* (1992). He also issued a series entitled *Cactusville Facsimiles*, which began in 1977

and ran to 100 parts. These included excerpts from classics of literature, such as first descriptions by Salm-Dyck and the great herbals of Gerard and Parkinson.

Another lasting legacy was his introduction of the concept of caudiciform succulents (Rowley, 1948), which in the 1960s gained unkind notoriety as TCPs: turnips, carrots and parsnips! This concept eventually led to Gordon's book on the subject entitled *Caudiciform and pachycaul succulents*, another beautifully produced book published by Strawberry Press in 1987.

Awards and accolades

Gordon's standing and achievements in the world of succulents have been recognised many times.

- He was made a Fellow of the NCSS in 1956 and Life member in 1981.
- Fellow of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America in 1974.
- Awarded the Veitch Memorial Medal of the RHS for services to horticulture in 1979.

- Presented with the Cactus d'Or in 1982 for services to the IOS, notably editor of the *Repertorium* or *Rep.* for a staggering 30 years.
- He was given the Allen Dyer Gold Medal award in 2000 by the Succulent Society of South Africa which "is conferred on people who have made significant contributions to the scientific knowledge of succulent plants".
- Most recently he was given the Myron Kimnach Lifetime Achievement Award by the Cactus and Succulent Society of America in 2013. I was delighted to accept this award on Gordon's behalf at the CSSA convention in Austin, Texas, in July of that year, which my wife Marjorie and I delivered to Gordon at Cactusville on our return (Fig. 4).

Gordon is commemorated in the names of a few succulents, notably the now fairly common *Senecio* (now *Curio*) *rowleyanus*, a creeping succulent daisy from South Africa, described by the famous German succulentist Hermann Jacobsen in 1968. More recently I named the hybrid *Gasteria* × *Gonialoe* cross ×*Gastonialoe* 'Gordon Rowley' in *CactusWorld* in his honour during the preparation of his final book in 2017. There is also the intergeneric hybrid cactus genus ×*Rowleyara*, which has a complex parentage of three genera, as well as *Lobivia rowleyi*, *Pygmaeocereus rowleyanus*, *Aeonium* ×*rowleyi* and *Greenovia* ×*rowleyi*.

His 80th and 90th birthdays were celebrated in style with mini-conventions held in the Reading area and organised by the Reading and Basingstoke Branch (Davies & Rowley, 2001; Mottram, 2011). At the second of these Gordon introduced the digital presentation entitled *Cactotherapy: A life with succulents* produced by Pete Arthurs and Jonathan Clark. This included many aspects of Gordon's interests, notably encounters with many personalities of the past, an introduction to his library, overseas trips and a glimpse into his interest in cinematography. Both birthday bashes featured appropriately decorated birthday cakes, another of Gordon's great loves.

The December 2008 issue of *CactusWorld* was dedicated to Gordon and featured a Gerhard Marx caricature on the cover. Tributes to Gordon in this issue included an annotated bibliography of his publications (Mottram, 2008), 'Rowley roving', a look back at some overseas journeys undertaken by Gordon

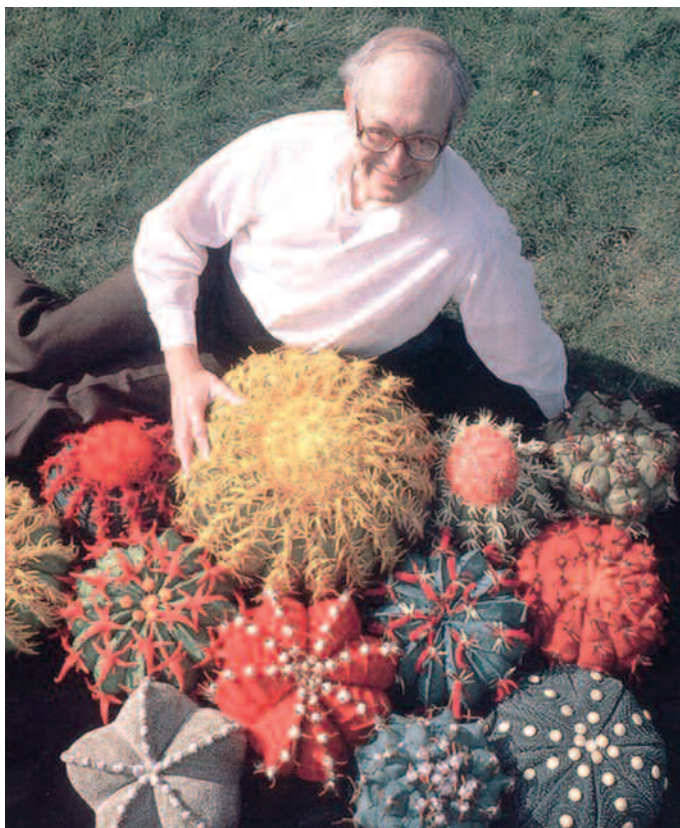


Fig. 5 Gordon with his collection of cactus cushions by the Japanese artist Mrs Masako Sugiyama (Photo: Drude de Looze, date unknown but c.1980)

(Newton, 2008) and 'Reminiscences of a member of the Gordon Rowley fan club' (Walker & Thorburn, 2008).

Rowley library

Another great legacy is the Rowley library. Gordon built this up over 70 years to cover succulent plants with emphasis on their taxonomy, evolution and history. The library at Cactusville was consulted by a steady stream of enquirers from around the world even in this digital age. In time, following Gordon's wishes, a trust will be established to manage the Gordon Rowley Foundation that will make the library and artwork accessible to future generations of succulent enthusiasts and students.

All of Gordon's books are adorned by the bookplate he designed, the background to which is provided by Mottram (2008). The library also includes some significant pieces of artwork featuring succulents from the works by famous succulentists of the past, notably Salm-Dyck, Besler and Miller. A possibly unique collection of cactus cushions is also included (Fig. 5).

Sense of humour

Aside from his great achievements in the succulent world, Gordon had an irrepressible sense of humour and fun as many readers will know. He particularly enjoyed the Goon Show and Laurel and Hardy.

Gordon had many pseudonyms often based on anagrams of his name including: Only Odd Grower, D Loony Grower, Noodly Grower, Professor Nodrog Yelwor, Gone dry on soo, Grew dry on soo, Lord Gonewordy, Rodney O'Growl, W R Gonedrooly, Roy Donwogler, Nogood Werrly, Ryder Gonolow.

Many of Gordon's correspondents can boast at least one pseudonym usually originating as an anagram coined by Gordon and so I occasionally became, for example, Walli Conker, All Nicework, Coral Winkle, Eric Knowall or Niloc (not my favourite!).

In 1981 to celebrate retirement from academia he published a little booklet that was an anthology of his poetry, entitled *Rowley Rhyming. Joyful Jingles for the under 0's*.

Here are two extracts, the first is nonsense poetry:

Comment on World affairs (1940)

*In vain I try to when I can,
Whichever nearly how,
And sometimes even as before,
So be it then as now.*

*In truth, they never often once
In softer twenty such,
But nineteen without doubt beside,
And eighteen half as much.*

*In, out! In out! And to and fro!
You rightly ask me why?
But notwithstanding all of this,
I'll try to till I die.*

*Alas, the tension was too great –
His brain cells overloaded,
And very slowly, silently,
With dignity exploded.*

The second is a limerick:

*There was a young lady called Tucker
Of flowers a passionate plucker,
Till she leapt in the air
With a yell of despair –
'Twas a large Yucca sucker that stuck her!*

Other interests

Gordon had many other interests about which he also displayed great knowledge and skill. I can merely list the main interests here:

- Meccano construction, famously exhibited as his large model of an electrically driven 'big wheel' in his upstairs study that transported small model cacti around.
- Classical music, notably Sibelius, from whom he was proud to own a signed and framed letter.
- Amateur movie making, which culminated in 1960 with *Cactus Polonaise*, featuring model cacti dancing to the music of Tchaikovsky, animated using Meccano, hence bringing together three disparate interests.
- Entomology with a butterfly collection.
- Minerals and fossils of which he had a sizeable collection.

Tributes to Gordon have been received from around the world via the BCSS Facebook page, from societies and individuals, notably from Kim Hamilton and the Cactus and Succulent Society of New South Wales, Australia and Rob Wallace of the CSSA.

Gordon leaves behind many many friends and acquaintances in the world of succulents and beyond both here in the UK and abroad. I like many others have lost a mentor and friend and I will miss him terribly. His huge legacy will remain forever. Rest in peace, Gordon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Several friends and colleagues have assisted in the compilation of this tribute to Gordon and I am deeply indebted to them all. Tony Morris provided details of Gordon's NCSS membership and awards. My wife Marjorie Thorburn read and commented on an earlier draft of this article. Alice Vanden Bon and Terry Hackwill provided specific pieces of information on request. Roy Mottram checked and commented on the details in Table 1 and provided photos, help and advice. Len Newton corrected a factual error in an earlier draft. I thank Drude de Looze, Len Newton and Marjorie Thorburn for use of their photos.

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